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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [ST](#) [XL](#)
SUBJECT: ANTIGUA RETURNS UPP TO POWER; ALP HEADS TO COURT

Classified By: Charge d, Affaires, a.i. D. Brent Hardt, for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Antigua and Barbuda's ruling United Progressive Party (UPP) won a closely contested election March 12, taking nine of the 17 seats and retaining its majority in parliament, but losing three previously-held seats in an election marred by delays and technical difficulties. Among the seats lost by the UPP was the seat held by the respected Finance Minister, Errol Cort. Soon after the election, PM Spencer shuffled the cabinet, shifting portfolios of the remaining UPP MPs and creating a new Ministry of State Security by merging Justice and National Defense -- and then promptly appointing Cort, now an unelected Senator, to serve as Security Minister. Despite losing, the opposition Antigua Labor Party (ALP) was heartened by its ability to pick up three seats and has vowed to contest at least three other seats in court due to what it termed "disenfranchisement" of voters caused by delays in opening some polling stations on election day. Having Cort in the Security chair should give a boost to our security relationship; having him out of the finance ministry, though, could slow our WTO gaming case talks. End Summary.

UPP Wins Close Victory

¶2. (C) After a hotly contested campaign that saw sporadic violence and sensational allegations on both sides Antigua and Barbuda's March 12 general election returned the United Progressive Party (UPP) to power with a slim majority of 9 of 17 seats. The Antigua Labour Party (ALP) won 7 seats, adding three seats from the previous election. Trevor Walker of the Barbados People's Movement (BPM) won the lone seat representing the island of Barbuda, and has pledged to support the UPP government. Despite losing significant ground in the election, PM Spencer put a positive spin on the outcome, stating that he was surprised that the UPP did not win more comfortably. According to one LP campaigner, internal polls had them winning in two other districts, the district won by the UPPs Harold Lovell and the seat won by John Maginle. Moreover, he noted the ALP candidate on Barbuda, Arthur Nibbs lost by only one vote, meaning the ALP could have won 10 seats with the shift of a few votes.

Election Day onfusion

¶3. (U) On election day, polling stations in several electoral districts did not open on time. Six of the 17 constituencies opened late, ranging from two to six hours late. One of the

hottest contested constituencies, St. Mary's North, saw considerable delays on Election Day: voting had been scheduled to begin at 6 a.m., but voting in all four of the St. Mary's polling centers opened late. The polling station staff, ready at 6:00 a.m., waited with their hands tied as officials failed to deliver election materials on time. Delays ranged from three to five hours as voters braved first rain and then heat to cast their votes. Election monitors witnessed elderly and handicapped individuals waiting for hours in line before and after the polls opened. Voters remained calm and no incidents were observed, but complaints and conspiracy theories were heard up and down the line of voters. The worst delays were seen in the St. John's Rural West district, the district of Prime Minister Baldwin Spencer, where voting did not start until noon -- a full six hours after the scheduled opening.

14. (U) Several voters complained that they needed to return to work and would not be able to return to vote due to scheduling conflicts. The GOAB allowed all employees four hours off, with pay, in order to vote. In St. Mary's North, which was won by the ALP's Molwyn Joseph by 21 votes, voter turnout was significantly lower than the national average of almost 85 percent. It is impossible to tell if the late start affected the outcome in the closer constituencies, but OAS election monitors and others agreed that the election, truncated though it was, should be characterized as free and fair.

ALP to Challenge Election Results

15. (C) Opposition Leader and former PM Lester Bird has called for election runoffs in three districts -- St. John's Rural West (the district won by PM Spencer); the constituency of Barbuda, won by Trevor Walker; and St. John's City East, the district won by UPP candidate John Maginley. Bird contended publicly that the voters were "disenfranchised" due to the late opening. (Note: PolOff was the OAS election observer in City West and can confirm that that constituency opened on time.) The ALP is seeking a legal injunction to prevent those members from being seated. ALP MP Robin Yearwood explained that if Spencer cannot be seated due to court order, then Chester Hughes, the PM's recently appointed deputy, would assume the premiership. However, other political commentators have speculated that if all three contested constituencies could not be seated then the ALP would hold a majority until the courts come to a decision or run-off elections are held.

16. (C) Despite failing to retake the majority, the swing of three seats back to the ALP is a sign that the party of the Birds -- long infamous as one of the region's most corrupt governments -- is still a force in Antiguan politics. The stigma of corruption continues to dog the party, but as new younger candidates come to the fore and the party steps out of the shadow of the Bird family, it can be expected to make gains. Young candidates like Gail Christian, age 32, who lost by only a few hundred votes to PM Baldwin Spencer in the largest constituency on the island, could very well take that seat in the next election.

17. (C) Entrenched ALP stalwarts such as the wealthy Syrian-Antiguan Hadeed family were backing the ALP heavily in this election after bankrolling the UPP's ascension to power in the 2004 election. The Hadeeds are concerned that Spencer could try to nationalize their power plant, which provides 50 percent of the island's electricity. On the morning after the election one of the Hadeed clan was seen speaking to the BPM's Trevor Walker, seeking to persuade him not to caucus with the UPP. Walker's importance to both sides was illustrated when Spencer awarded him the potentially lucrative and highly sought-after Ministry of Transportation and Public Works, with its control of contracting for infrastructure projects and hundreds of jobs. With Walker locked up, even if the ALP were able to obtain a runoff in the three seats that they are seeking, they would have to win two of the three to

wrest control from the UPP -- a feat that is looking less and less likely as the dust settles.

Cort Loses Seat

18. (C) Former Finance Minister Errol Cort lost his closely contested rematch with former PM Bird by 71 votes. Bird, who dubbed himself the "comeback kid," expressed to the Charge in August, 2008 his confidence that he could take back the seat from Cort. Newly re-elected ALP MP Robin Yearwood lamented to PolOff soon after the election that a UPP win and a Cort loss was the worst possible outcome of the elections. Cort is well respected by all sides, he noted, and it would be a loss for the Antiguan people if he were not in the Government. Had Cort won and the ALP won he would likely have remained Finance Minister, former UPP Minister of State-turned-ALP supporter Aziz Hadeed said in a post election meeting. The constitution requires that the Finance Minister be a seated member of parliament, so to keep Cort in the government PM Spencer increased the role of the Justice Ministry, renaming it the Ministry of National Security, and appointed Cort as its first Minister.

The New Look Cabinet

19. (U) Cabinet Changes:

-- Attorney General Justin Simon will retain his portfolio as attorney general.

-- Minister Wilmoth Daniel, former Minister of Public Works, will take responsibility for the Ministry of Health, Social Transformation and Consumer Affairs.

-- Minister Harold Lovell, former Minister of Tourism, will take responsibility for the Ministry of Finance and Public Administration.

-- Minister John Maginley, former Minister of Health, will take responsibility for the Ministry of Tourism, Civil Aviation and Culture.

-- Minister Jacqui Quinn-Leandro, former Minister of Labor, will take responsibility for Education, Gender, Sport and Youth Affairs.

-- Minister Hilson Baptiste, former Minister of Social Transformation, will take responsibility for the Ministry of Agriculture, Lands, Housing and the Environment.

-- Minister Trevor Walker (BPM), former Minister of State for Utilities, will take responsibility for the Ministry of Works, Transportation and Labor.

-- Minister Errol Cort, former Minister of Finance, will take responsibility for the newly formed Ministry of National Security. The new ministry will encompass the former Ministry of Justice and Defense positions previously held by Senator Colin Derrick and PM Spencer respectively.

-- MP Chester Hughes was named Deputy Prime Minister and will hold various responsibilities in the government.

Comment

10. (C) The UPP's return to power keeps in the premiership a PM who is favorably disposed toward the U.S. despite his left leaning political orientation and consistently strong backing for Cuba. During and after U.S. elections, Spencer publicly registered his strong support for President Obama,

including by renaming his country's highest peak "Mount Obama." This enthusiasm suggests Spencer would welcome closer engagement with the U.S. It is encouraging that Spencer was keen to retain his most competent and respected minister, Errol Cort, in a top job, and has handed the Senator a broad and significant portfolio that will involve extensive interaction with the U.S. With Cort as MINSEC, we should expect progress on our security agenda -- everything from MLAT requests and ship visits to a PSI shipboarding agreement and possibly a SOFA. At the same time, Cort's departure from Finance will set back our continuing talks to resolve the WTO gaming issue as new faces familiarize themselves with the case. HARDT
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